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Exploring an Archetypal Divide

Epics, Tricksters, *Epic Tricksters*

Gregory E. Rutledge

Tricksters, African American folklorists, and literary scholars epitomized the means by which enslaved Africans and their descendants outwitted their "masters," people of European descent who are associated with the epic. The archetypal divide (African/American tricksters versus European/American heroes) notwithstanding, the bedrock principle drawn from trickster lore holds that slave-tricksters double as "trickster-heroes" who outwitted the powerful masters. But if the master could also be—or uses the ways of—a trickster, is this true? This article, based on an introduction and analysis of three traditional African epic performances, finds that epic heroes already apprehend and deploy trickster strategies. These "epic tricksters," spanning the folkoric spectrum from trickster to epic hero, fundamentally challenge the existing trickster paradigm. Although it is a type not subject to or trumped by the wit of tricksters proper, the epic trickster, study shows, is diffused by an eco-cautionary aesthetics contained within African epic performance lore.

We now find that mythology also conceals an ethical system, but one which, unfortunately, is far more remote from our ethic than its logic is from our logic.
—Claude Lévi-Strauss (1978)

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Trickster, scholars of African American lore and literature know, prevailed as the Africa-born, archetypal culture hero of witty subterfuge and survival at a time when American slaves faced no good choices: flight to freedom in an alien world where even second sight could do them little good; open rebellion against a country that had routed the British Empire and uprooted numerous indigenous American societies; and, uplift based on a racial competition in which the centuries-old ideology of exceptionalism—the roots of slavery—was identified as the high bar they needed to reach, and mount, en route to freedom and equality.[1] Indeed, at least since the mid-nineteenth century, former slaves and abolitionists[2] have known that this struggle was not only a clear and present danger, but also a transtemporal one reaching centuries back to a point when Western history and epic aesthetics reached a happy union. In ever-increasing numbers in the nineteenth-century fin de siècle—a period known as the "nadir" in African American history largely because of the proliferation of lynchings—black intellectuals concretized the use of belles lettres to critique and undermine America's racialized epic performance.

Not only did these "New Negroes" respond to *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and the nationalization of "separate but equal," but they also inaugurated a literary "Renaissance" in which ancient epic performance and nineteenth-century white supremacy were understood to be in a cause-effect or strongly correlated relationship. After all, works like Sutton E. Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio: A Study of the Negro Race* (1899), Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods* (1901), Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood; or, The Hidden Self* (1902–3), and W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) either explicitly emerged from the authors' awareness that epic performance and supremacist law were conflated—that is, that Homer Plessy was the plaintiff was very likely *not* lost upon them—or their keen apprehension that American racism constituted a modern epical challenge of one form or another.

With the advent of the civil rights era and the birth of black studies programs, European-American scholars like Roger D. Abrahams, a folklorist interested in heroic storytelling, could begin a 1965 article with the following declaration: "The actions we consider heroic reflect a life which is based upon contest values and a societal hierarchy built on the model of a male-centered family" (341). Although explicitly a survey of heroes in America, Abrahams, in a subtle cautionary tale against the Vietnam War ethos, references Homer as the genesis (341n1). Abrahams's "trickster-hero" paradigm proceeded from the American association of African lore with tricksters and Europe with epic heroes, but the 1960s—largely

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due to the 1965 English-language version of D. T. Niane's *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*[3]—introduced knowledge of traditional African epic performances to American scholars and audiences. Indeed, a seminal comparative moment occurred with the 1979 publication of Isidore Okpewho's *The Epic in Africa: Toward a Poetics of the Oral Performance*, which placed African, Homeric, and Anglo-Saxon epic heroes in a comparative, performance-based context. Although African epic and African American literary scholarship have largely remained divided on either side of the "black" Atlantic over the decades, for various reasons and in spite of scholarly efforts,[4] this greater awareness of epic performance and race helped establish a critical foundation.

Not surprisingly, knowledge of causal and correlative relations between epic and racism was widespread enough by the 1980s that literary scholars outside the field of ethnic literature knew it. For example, it motivated Paul A. Olson,[5] a Medieval/Renaissance scholar and civil rights activist, to leave his canonical comfort and examine the intersections of the Greco-Roman epic genre and racial domination. "Conventional criticism of the epic in the Western world," Olson wrote in 1982, holds that the "actions of the gods are to be read as allegory and the actions of the hero as history which teaches by example. The actions of the gods are not ... outside the historical world.... Achilles, Aeneas, and Odysseus are said to have actually walked the earth and done the deeds recounted when they appear in household or battle contexts" (3).

Greco-Roman gods and epic heroes striding the earth in a distant past that authorized similar behavior in the very real present? This constitutes a tricky situation if ever there was one. But this tricky racial reality has long been considered a natural environment for slave-era tricksters like Brer Hare, Brer Fox, and slave John. Trickster is masterful and wonderful, enough so that a spider from a classic children's story, E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web* (1952), can dupe and symbolically reverse the whole Great Chain of Being. Since Antiquity, this Great Chain of Being—or *scala naturae*—was believed to range from God and the angels down to humans, in descending order from whiteness to blackness, then to animals, and finally to the demonic beings anchored by Satan. Like the Lakota's Iktomi and the Anansi of the Ashanti, of the southwestern United States and West African, respectively, Charlotte A. Cavitica, a gray spider who is so small Wilbur, a white runt pig born on the farm of John Arable, cannot see her when they first encounter. Nevertheless, Charlotte outwits and outperforms everyone: not just Wilbur, but the masters of the land—the Arables and *Homer* Zuckerman and his

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sharper-witted wife, Edith—and the entire community. The masters of the land and community altogether dismiss the "common gray spider" and her "trick," and praise Wilbur as some "miracle" from God. Consequently, White's story is all the more poignant because of its dim ending: "The Fair Grounds were deserted. The sheds and buildings were empty and forlorn. The infield was littered with bottles and trash. Nobody, of the hundreds of people that had visited the Fair, knew that a grey spider had played the most important *part* of all. No one was with her when she died" (White 35–37, 80–81, 144, 171; italics mine). That "part," a remarkable trick, wasn't yet done, for Charlotte's egg sac, her "magnum opus," would later bestow 514 replicas of herself on a world exiting the dimness of winter.

But though Charlotte's mid-twentieth-century *Homer*ic success is "radiant," "terrific," and "humble"—adjectives she uses to describe Wilbur—one may easily vex this trickster-versus-epic paradigm of the weaker and smaller trumping the masters. In other words, does this dynamic still obtain if we move from Charlotte's time and place—a 1950s farm in New Hampshire—to a cotton plantation in 1850s America still dominated by the masters of the land? Lawrence W. Levine, considering a seldom-discussed contradiction from trickster lore, establishes the archetypal problematic confronting academics as he describes the behavior of some slave masters: "Though they might possess great power, they did not always wield it openly and directly but often with guile and indirection. *This last point especially has been neglected; the strong and not merely the weak could function as trickster....* Former slaves recalled numerous examples of the master as trickster." Because he ignores or underestimates the significance of the racially based incommensurability that divides trickster lore and modern (antebellum) behavior, Levine's epiphany is attenuated, ironically, by the racial divide. At the very moment the master-trickster epiphany demands heightened critical engagement, Levine defaults to a narrow, stereotypical reading. In other words, his master-trickster epiphany itself reifies the "impassable" racial divide and reveals his inability to unmask the folkloric performance actuating modernity and excavate the folkloric equivalency of all human behavior. Hence, instead of exploring his "strong ... trickster" epiphany, he states, "trickster tales were a prolonged and telling *parody* of white society" (118–19; italics mine). This language maintains the racialized archetypical divide—black/African/trickster, white/European/hero—because slaves' parody of whites does not posit a fundamental quality, just a behavioral feature. It is perhaps most telling that Levine is skeptical of the existence of an African epic tradition (Levine 460n12);[6] the epic trickster is not a possibility.

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Confronted with this dilemma, and a cultural performance in which heroic epics were ascribed to "white" masters while tricksters hailed from African/"Indian" Others, it is little wonder then that just as the slave community invested much storytelling performance in animal and slave-John trickster tales, scholars and artists have sought to fathom and exploit the trickster's genius ever since. Consider Zora Neale Hurston's "High John de Conquer" (1943), undoubtedly one of the lyrical exemplars of double-talk signifying in the African American canon. With just a few brushstrokes of mother-wit, Hurston's World War II–era essay elevated trickster, who had been in decline since the end of slavery, to new heights: her laughing and singing High John de Conquer, a "hope-bringer" for America during the Nazi's epic-like blitzkrieg, was famous for "making a way out of no-way. Hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick" (542–43).

Ralph Ellison may have been playing language games, like a true modernist, but he, too, may have hit a "straight lick with a crooked stick" when he, inspired by the Trojan War cycle that informed his *Invisible Man* (1952), identified "trickster Ulysses" in 1958 ("Change the Joke" 58). Ellison did not explain, but he seems to foreground Ulysses's Trojan horse and his engagement with Polyphemus the Cyclops, a Titan, two of the premier tropes of Homeric iconography, as evidence of Ulysses's trickster wit. Extending this logic, it is critical to note that neither Achilles nor any of the other preeminent Greek epic heroes bring the heretofore impregnable Ilios to ruin; instead, it is "trickster Ulysses," an epic hero equipped with the trickster's guile, what we might usefully label an *epic trickster*.[7]

The possible existence of an epic trickster ontology gives added import to E. V. Rieu's 1945 remarks that Odysseus was a "godlike" figure or "superman" (19), and raises urgent questions: can the trickster-proper be subversive enough to deconstruct epic potentiality borne of trickster's guileful, witty modus operandi and the heroic epic protagonist's unsurpassed physical abilities? Also, once such a trickster-savvy epic figure is unleashed, is there anything earthly that can stop him/her/it?

Henry Louis Gates's Signifying Monkey theory suggests he anticipates this epic trickster potentiality, hence the appeal to him of Esu, the Yoruba creator-god trickster. Aligned with state-making potential as a creator-god, Esu's trickster liminality nevertheless sidesteps or minimizes the ideological baggage of the epic. Inspired by Hurston, Gates turned the Signifying Monkey, a figure he derived from Esu-Elegbara, the Yoruba trickster deity and god of interpretation, respectively, into the very emblem of ironic signifyin(g), alterity, and transgression. As the

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ultimate form of "betwixt and between," the trickster becomes creation and destruction—or, Gates argues, deconstruction. Hence Gates's deployment of Derridean linguistic theory, what he posits as a recent articulation of its older Esu-Elegbara counterpart, to disrupt the racialized and gendered hierarchical orders and binaries Western Enlightenment epistemology constructed. Consequently, Gates argues, the Signifying Monkey is neither male nor female, black nor white, but a "trinary" source of disorder that could be a force for solidarity one moment and an indeterminate, paradoxical one the next (28–35, 55).

Notwithstanding its revolutionary import, Gates's Signifying Monkey theory, aside from criticism unique to it,[8] shares with other slavery-related trickster studies an assumption that sutures together a binary made up of racialized, gendered archetypes: tricksters are small African animals whose tales originate from cultures still in a premodern infancy unquickened by male civilization-building, while epic heroes are their European-derived antithesis. Cultural chauvinism and centuries-old global politics associated with the rise of Western Europe, and a millennia-old canonical bias are critical to this archetypal binary. The in medias res beginning of the *Iliad*, featuring a veritable pantheon of epic heroes in the prime of their adult-male sublimity, was codified as generic brilliance in Aristotle's *Poetics* and accepted as the Western norm for epic writing and heroic figures.[9]

But if, as this study argues, the heroic epic already anticipates trickster immanence and stratagems—Zeus, grandsire of Achilles, is a veritable "zoomorphia" of swans, golden rain, and so forth—then the trickster's revolutionary potency, the alterity of being/becoming, is already a co-opted signifyin(g). In other words, Hermes, the fleet father of hermeneutics Gates recognizes as the "Western kinsman" of Esu (8–9), will be mired in quicksand by comparison to Zeus's epic trickster alterity.

But the epic trickster paradigm deserves critical attention that is far from classical. Tricky and powerful Southern planters made the Civil War inevitable, and their equivalents brought us the world wars that perhaps inspired *Charlotte's Web*, but a worse problem confronts us: a war on Nature, capable of drying arable land and warming us all, that makes the cautionary aesthetics and ecological necessity of epic performance something we must not neglect.

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Epics, Tricksters, and the Ecological Necessity

Although Elizabeth Schultz's insightful essay, "Odysseus Comes to Know His Place: Reading *The Odyssey* Ecocritically" (2009), does not explicitly address the foregoing trickster-related issues and questions, it articulates an ecological necessity directly related to Odysseus's exploits as an epic hero who is not averse to trickery. The *Odyssey* stages the homecoming of Odysseus, but instead of marriage and home, Schultz privileges his return journey as a ten-year cooling down period ending with his reconnection to the earth. Odysseus evolves from an anthropocentric exploiter and dominator to one who is a steward of the earth or, in some instances, a part of the complex synergy between human and nonhuman on which the biomorphic model relies. Implicit to Schultz's reading is a latent orality, manifest in Homeric similes in contrast to metaphor, associated with biomorphic meaning. The similes connect "human characters with the world of animals and birds" while not erasing their distinctiveness; the metaphors, Schultz implies, disrupt this synergy. Likewise, the more epic creativity is attributed to Odysseus in his anthropocentric mode, the more his actions align with greater "disaster and death." Polyphemus, a "good steward of the land," is victimized by Odysseus, Schultz argues, for example, and Odysseus's ultimate feat of epic creativity, venturing to Hades, invokes the ultimate threat: "Homer envisages an apocalyptic world, one resembling Hades and caused by human irresponsibility, aggression, and greed. No sunless state can prosper. The sunless state is the extreme manifestation of the effects of anthropocentric model on the physical environment. No sunless state can nurture life or nature" (Schultz 303–5).[10] Thus, far from being just an *Odyssey*, its epical journey motif is equal parts ecological study: his extended—seven years in this case—period of relative isolation and "meditation in the wildness of Calypso's island," followed by a ritual act that associates him with olive trees, and, finally, Odysseus's storytelling performance with the Phaecians at the end of which he is likened to a "hard-working yeoman" connected to the land and animals (307–8). In short, Schultz argues that immanent in Homer's text is an oral performance of common/sense that cools and slows down Odysseus's body.

Against the epic trickster thesis and Shultz's compelling argument, one might demur on rhetorical grounds: a single trick, or two—a giant Trojan Horse here, the blinding of a giant Titan there—does not a "trickster Ulysses" make. The only way of ascertaining the reliability of the epic trickster thesis would be to know the

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original performance context. Mikhail Bakhtin, speaking against the epic-related horrors brought about by two Great Wars, rightfully observes that this context is unrecoverable because it lies at an "absolute" remoteness in time, geography, and culture from the modern Western present (13). But Bakhtin privileges Aristotle's literature-based epic theory, which elides the foreign orality informing the Trojan folklore tradition (Dimock 82–84). Thus when Bakhtin valorizes the democratic polyglossia of the modern novel in contrast to the autocratic monoglossia of the epic (12), he commits the very fallacy (of distribution) he seeks to avoid: totalizing an epic theory based on Aristotle, literature, and European universality.

Live Homeric performances can no longer speak to us, but living epic performances represent traditional wisdom from which we can learn. Irony is epical and sharp in this regard, for scholars of epics from Africa—a "Dark Continent" considered incapable of producing epics—reveal just how much traditional African epic performances can teach us. Fa-Digi Sisòkò's 1968 performance of *The Epic of Son-Jara*, which chronicles the exploits of the founder of the Old Malian empire and best known of African epic heroes, proves that world religions and heroic epics can coexist. Matriarchal, goddess-centered societies can produce heroic epics, ones full of laughter, like Okabou Ojobolo's performance of *The Ozidi Saga* (1977) from the Ijo of Nigeria; after Ozidi the Elder is slain by jealous warlords, his unborn son is spirited away by his sorceress grandmother, who nurtures him until he can pursue justice. Finally, Candi Rureke, of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, performs a *Mwindo Epic* (1969) featuring an epic hero, Mwindo, as amazing as any who is not a founder. This epic hails from the Banyanga (or Nyanga), an ethnic group not associated with imperialism. Mwindo is the incarnation of *l'enfant terrible* perforce since his greedy father, King Shemwindo, unleashes his full arsenal against his own son to protect his wealth.

Isidore Okpewho, using an Afro-Homeric epic comparative in *The Epic in Africa: Toward a Poetics of the Oral Performance* (1979), did much more than bring African epics to the attention of Western literary scholars. By centering performance in a modern environment that privileges ancient Greek literary archetypes, Okpewho helped establish a radical precept: it is the *performance* that fills in the archetype, not vice versa. For those seeking an understanding of these archetypal performances that is useful for finding fundamental commonalities in body-politics with similar traditions, Lord Raglan's heuristic offers an important point of departure. Raglan's paradigm for epic protagonists may very well be, as Stephen Belcher argues, "valuable as an interpretive tool [for] those

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elements of the story that show most signs of narrative streamlining, that makes the hero almost generic." One has to balance this paradigm with sociohistorical contingency the storytellers incorporate and the particularities of the culture owing to language, beliefs, idiosyncrasies, and customs. "Raglan's categories are so general," Belcher cautions, "that the specific cultural values of individual heroes dissipate" (111–12). For example, African heroic epic traditions—Mwindo, from the Banyanga, Ozidi from the Ijo of Nigeria, and Sunjata[11] of Mali ("MOS Epics," collectively)—contain so much polyglossia and indeterminacy that the act of "translation is the Wallow of Despair" (Biebuyck, *Hero* 5, 6). Thus, against the simpler "truth" of the epic hero ideal, figures like Sunjata emerge as "trouble, for they represent disruption, change, and the drive for self-fulfillment," and operate, along with their antagonists, in an environment that defies a "simplified moral allegory of right and wrong" (Bird 282–83).

The complex allegory of the West/Central African epic performance starts with the word (narrative), but then expands to include the totality of the specific performance in which all the elements within it do not equal the sum of its parts. In other words, the Mwindic, Ozidic, and Sunjatic habituses include the artistic (for example, metaphorical, structural, thematic) and cultural/regional differences that make each performance a unique act, 3-D life-narrative, and spiritual experience that not only links everything together, but also makes them contradictions, too. What is important here is that the shift away from the song and orality of complex folk allegory into the "simplified moral allegory" arising with modern print culture is inseparable from good/bad, white/colored, male/female binaries informing the West's epic performance.

Form and Epic Performance: *Nyama-Atambga*

Considering Western epic ontology and a classical literary allegory grounded in the ultimate binary (Homeric/epic *literature* as great, its absence as bad), Walter Benjamin's approach to allegory is insightful. In his departure from and challenge to conventional literary allegory, Benjamin excavated German *Trauerspiel*, an older, performance-based allegorical form he offered as a genre that redefines understanding of the epic and society. Indeed, *Trauerspiel* bridges West/Central African cultural and Western/European traditions as the complex allegory Benjamin articulates in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928), for it explains his

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valorization of Bertolt Brecht's "epic theater" and performance genres, and the philosophical method he espouses for knowing everything about a genre.

Mindful of what he calls "popular" or "common linguistic" (39) denotations of allegory used by Western European artists and historians since the Middle Ages, Benjamin offers a "philosophical understanding of allegory" (189) that escapes the problem of modern Western allegory. Western allegory—a parallel between "an illustrative image and its abstract meaning" (162)—arises out of theological distrust of the "common" people's ability to confront the "earliest rude world," which was considered "too crude and uncivilized" and full of a "chaotic mass of metaphor." For this reason, the complex expanse of metaphor was reduced to, flattened into, and beautified—allegorized—as simple things, such as rhymes and fables, that conveyed moral lessons and knowledge of God the "common people" could grasp and appreciate (168–74).

Benjamin's solution to this in German art is the *Trauerspiel* form of tragic drama; the philosophical and theological solution, represented by *Trauerspiel*, is the "allegorical" perspective in which all of the historical and phenomenal data associated with a specific "idea" are considered the "representation of truth" (28). The sublime beauty of symbol or image, viewed from Benjamin's perspective, is nothing more than a "fragment," or "ruin," that is the last vestige of antiquity, a mere "material" remnant out of which the modern world has created sacred "artificiality." Lost in the violence of this arbitrary process, in which "reading was obligatory" and "educational," and "vast libraries" function as the ultimate "monument" to the "power of knowledge," is the "ordinary every day affairs." In other words, particularly the "free, spontaneous utterance of the creature" and the cultural practice Benjamin values against the way "written language of allegory enslaves" (176–84, 202), honest and objective openness is obligatory.

Instead of allegory, representing the superficial "judgment" of those grasping for the eternal who, in fact and performance, create a simple surface that closes off truth, one might profitably call Benjamin's concept allegor*ye*, or the allegor*y*-cal. Here, the *ye*/*y* denotes openness, liminality and contradiction (vowel and/or consonant), and, perhaps most importantly, the irrefutable logic of orality. For Benjamin, allegory arises out of Western subjectivity located in "historical codification" and "extreme foreshortening of the historical perspective" (27, 202–3), inductive and deductive knowledge as "possession" (29, 42–43), art, and Christianity. Religion is critical here to Benjamin, for intentionality is seen as the mechanism for achieving the eternal in a world full of "transience" and "variety,"

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one interpenetrated by the Greco-Roman pantheon so much that Christianity is inseparable from it (38, 220–26). Allegorye, by contrast, is not a "metaphysical" exercise in knowledge "found within, but should appear in action, like the blood coursing through the body" (39). Thus, when Benjamin says, "The idea is a monad," he is speaking about unified essence and infinitude. Allegorye, as the real-world, artistic corollary of the idea, is a monad that reveals ultimate unity through a methodology revealed when one has "absorbed"—note the passive, receptive tense—"all the history" of a given "phenomenon" (47). Benjamin's allegorycal holism, in which the "corpse as life" erases Cartesian dualism and gives vitality to life (216), ultimately reconciles everything—African and European, premodern and modern—in the true "Christian origin of the allegorical outlook" (220): "And God saw *everything* that he had made, and, behold, it was very good" (Genesis 1:31, quoted by Benjamin at p. 233; italics mine).

Useful here is the clear parallel between allegorye and ancient West/Central African allegorical essences relevant to epic performances, like *nyama* and *Atambga*. Just as "everything" is God-given here, the deepest spirituality, so is *nyama*, fittingly, the soulfulness of everything.[12] As the Africanist outlook informs us that "great heroic epic traditions do also occur among [African] people who have no traditions of conquest or a centralized political system" (Biebuyck, "The African" 337–38), the "allegorical outlook" demands we leave behind conventional, allegorical understanding of Homeric epic and seek, in the "free, spontaneous utterances of the creature," the allegorycal epic.

Senegambian and Banyangan *nyama*, and *Atambga* of the Niger Delta's Ijo, a constitutive and deconstitutive incantation of "ancient speech" and "unknown language" that is also a performance, are the spirit of allegorye giving the possibilities of life and light, rhythm and blues—*sol* and *soul*—to the epic performance. Instead of *griots*, a term resulting from colonial violence and simple allegory, *nyama* is a mathematical sublime in its own right, for it is a multifactorial signifying in which its formal denotation, according to David C. Conrad and Barbara E. Frank, "*does not equal the sum of its parts*." Contra colonial taxonomies that flattened and thus distorted Mande *nyamakalaya*, the professional collectives of artists and artisans, *nyama* is likewise made up of complex and shifting forms of "contradiction and ambiguity" (Conrad and Frank 7–10, 13). While Mande *nyama* denotes what can be variably described as a "natural force," "soul," or "energy of action," the specific type of force can be "(a) evil or satanic; (b) morally neutral; (c) dangerous; (d) polluting; (e) energizing or animating; (f) necessary for action; or (g) indicative

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of imperfect control." If one considers that *nyama(m)*, for some Mande speakers, doubles in meaning as "garbage" or "refuse," the multiple denotations of *kala* lead to a proliferation of meanings of *nyamakalaya*, and that regional and individual denotations—including the Mande nobles' (*horon[w]*) perspectives—amplify this exponentially,[13] *nyamakalaya* easily outstrips, and potentially subverts, colonial taxonomies. In this regard, *nyamakalaya* itself is an anti- and postcolonial critique that goes from a confusing, Bakhtinian carnival (*nyaga*, in the Mandekakan dialect in western Mande, is a "celebration, festival") to a trash talkin' allegorycal performance and an all out revolution and riot of meaning (Bird, "Production" 283–84; Bird, Kendall, and Tera 28–31; Bird, Koita, and Soumaouro vii; Hoffman 39) (italics in original).[14]

Of course, in simple, temporal-spatial terms that are pre-/postslavery and pre-/postcolonial and that recognize the cosmology of art and life, *nyama* is also natural, holistic, and balance-minded—in a word, and place that is neither terra incognito nor tabula rasa, it is the forest. The rain forest, the "world" of the Nyanga, is a place where "there are many customs" and "strange ways." *Nyama* takes on different, but related, meaning here. For the Nyanga, *nyama* designates the bulk of forest mammals, but the primacy of hunting and the forest for the Nyanga does not encompass the hero-chief. The hero (*murai*), who is also the future chief, has a "mystic bond or alliance" with "certain animals." Significantly, the chief's symbolic embodiment of "Nyamurairi, chief of the divinities" (Biebuyck, *Hero* 26–27, 62, 98–99), serves to transport *nyama* from the mundane and toward the animals of the forest in a manner that folds them into everything spiritual. The forest is full of "dangerous beings" and "deceivers," but it is also the location of life and death and spirituality. In Nyanga circumcision rituals, held in the forest away from the village, the epitome of this dynamic is *nyamasangwa*, "one-dressed-in-many-things." The *nyamasangwa*, associated with turtle, iguana, and many birds, especially the hornbill, which symbolically represents female and male elements ("intelligence [nesting care] and aggression [when his young are attacked]"), finds truest representation in the forest's *kirímu-dragon*, "a big animal with black hide, seven heads, teeth like a dog, huge belly, and tail of an eagle" (Biebuyck, "Nyanga" 89, 90). The importance of the "dragon" *Kirímu*, as metonym for *nyamasangwa*, seems to be borne in the fact that he is "prominent" in the Nyanga corpus of epics and heroic tales (Biebuyck, *Hero* 27, 67).

Shekarisi Rureke's storytelling of the *Mwindo Epic* is a dynamic, *nyama*-rich performance of real art and *epical realism*. Even at the level of the primary

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characters, allegorye informs all Mwindic performances: though some primary actors populate all the epics and some occur in most of them, the "range and the intensity of roles assumed by each principal actor vary in degrees of elaboration." Indeed, while Mwindo is the epic protagonist, even his role shifts from hero to antagonist (Biebuyck, *Hero* 27–28).

Correlative to the many-thing-ness of *nyamasangwa* created out of Rureke's word-picture performance, a natural and supernatural African sublime meant to overwhelm one's sense of comprehension, is the Sunjata performance. In these Sunjatic performances, the *faasa* (personal praises) contained in the *jelikan* "power language" wielded by the *(d)jeli* (epic bards) is a context-specific performance of *nyama* whose very syntactic structure transforms the simple into empowering obscurity. Taking her cues, in part, from the Mande's Komo masks and the proverb *Nyama bè kuma la* ("There is *nyama* in speech"), Barbara G. Hoffman analogizes the *jelikan* aesthetic of power to that of bardic language at its best: "elaborate speech obscures it, hides all or part of its referential content, renders its meaning ambiguous, and thus dangerous." Thus, she says of the transformation of a Komo mask and *jelikan*, just as "matter ... is added to it over time, the multiplying of horns and quills, the layering of clay and blood, and the quantities of dangerous force (*nyama*)" make them "more obscure" and "powerful," "Griot language (*jelikan*) ... derives power from a simple syntactic structure whose meaning is made obscure." The syntactic structure is made up of "conjoined noun phrases, not complete sentences," that are "uttered very rapidly ... like gunfire, bombarding the noble with more sound than can be assimilated, causing confusion." In this powerful rap, where staccato chants fly like bullets and sensible referentiality is *know*-where to be found, Hoffman suggests that meaningful "predication is performed not with verbs and objects but through the interaction of the griot and noble in the performance context" (Hoffman 39–42).

Thus, the *faasa*—"personal mottoes" or praises—of *jelikan* evidence, for Hoffman, the genre "most laden with dangerous force (*nyama*)." These bards, getting a bad rap from the *horon(w)* even though these nobles greatly admire, and fear, their power at the same time, exemplify their allegorycal rap in ways all too familiar to complaints about gangsta rappers, and tricksters: "They dabble in the occult. They lie. They act shamelessly. They comport themselves without constraint or control. They plead weakness. They beg. They manifest sexuality in public places. They dance with wild gestures. They raise their voices. They shout and yell in public. The *nyamakalaya* are utterly alien: they are 'The Other'" (Bird, Kendall, and Tera 31).

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Transgressive/Ideal to Excessive/Cautionary

Contra Homer-centered notions of the ideal epic hero,[15] the West African epic hero is an ideal/transgressive persona, a "transcendent" figure "whose heroic qualities are never perceived without some taint of deviance" (Austen, "Criminals" 385).[16] This transgressive aspect closes the Western, imagined divide between epic hero and trickster proper and creates the possibility of a deformed, hybrid, context-dependent figure, the epic trickster. Deformation as masked or unrecognized power, in epic narratives, resonates with the spirit, if not form, of trickster tales across a range and combination of markers, including, but not limited to, sociopolitical, spatial, filial, maternal, age-related, and physical factors.

Although not indexed to trickster aesthetics, the deformity that motivates the behavior of African epic protagonists, of course, is well understood: "In Nyanga thinking," Biebuyck declares, "the hero's uniqueness lies, above everything else, in his ability to reverse destiny.... Born against his father's will, the son of a wife who has no ritual status, threatened at birth, rejected, abandoned, confronted with many enemies, exposed to hardships and tests, the hero manages to affirm himself and to reorient the course of existence.... The hero's capacity to reverse destiny accounts, more than anything else, for his surpassing stature" (*Hero* 104). This amply demonstrates, though coded as "hardships and tests," the deformation of the epic protagonists (and his family). The survival of the hero, and the tribe, after all, relates to a question of the well-formed body: Mwindo is, Biebuyck notes, "invulnerable." Biebuyck's statement, then, provides a definition for deformity as an existential question relating to matters of hardship. The idea implicit in Biebuyck's observation is that each subsequent hardship deforms the protagonist's body-biologic, body-genetic (his epic community), and body-politic (it's a bad land). The deformed body, quite frankly, means survival itself is at stake. Biebuyck's thoughts on Mwindo's "ability to reverse destiny" warrants a critical revision, for Mwindo's destiny is not to simply consecrate his epic ontology, but to escape it with equal urgency. He may be an epic hero, but he is also a necessary evil the Nyanga are far from imagining as a celebrity-hero to be emulated. Mwindo, in other words, exemplifies the African epic performance's ideal/transgressive dynamic.

Biebuyck notes the "contradictions" of Mwindo, but because he privileges the hero of destiny as the future chief,[17] he flattens out the Nyanga's cosmology of the people/folk ("comitatus") and dematerializes the epic corpus represented by

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the deformation. Here, even as he recognizes in Mwindo a figure in whom "fighting skills" and "great battle scenes" are de-emphasized in favor of "trickery and magic" (*Hero* 42–43), Biebuyck still advances the classical heroic epic template, what Homer scholar Mark Buchan calls the "comfort ... of teleological readings" (17). Biebuyck waxes teleological as he describes Mwindo, who "has no physical handicap or youthful weakness which might deter the emergence of his heroic stature." Although noting Mwindo's apparent lack of fighting prowess, and his magical fortitude, Biebuyck still references the resplendent abilities making his body "strong and invulnerable" (*Hero* 101). In this manner, he implicitly follows the traditional, allegorical script.

But if the critical lens is West/Central African allegorye instead, the orientation toward the eternal, "perfect individual" Benjamin problematizes collapses into a performative context full of rich details that do not default to the idealized, classical notions of the epic hero's destiny. The contradictions Biebuyck notes take on organic dimension, for the Mwindic ideals—"no physical handicap or youthful weakness," "born speaking and laughing," walking "from the moment of birth"—are not simply de-emphasized in favor of magic and trickery, but they become deformations of character implicating caution as an inseparable aspect of epic ontology. Essentially, allegorye calls for an alternate reading strategy since the epic hero has such weight in the Western, modern imaginary. Instead of reading the specific moments of epic action with knowledge of the outcome, we should forget destiny and what we know of the story, for it is full of stock assumptions about success. If we approach Mwindo without the stock assumptions, then his destined success against the impossible and metamorphosis into chief could be considered a mere denouement to what is most important: the specific values the culture foregrounds, including warnings, not only the glorious, destined apotheosis for the great individual and tribe whose imperial dawn has just begun.

The African epic's allegorycal outlook helps to illumine deformity as a central feature of the epic's folk semantics that are too often obscured and shadowed by epic/special effects. Against the modern orientation toward cleanliness, classical beauty, greatness, and epic/perfection associated with Homeric epics, traditional African culture's regard for epic ontology is more organic and complex in its reading of the mask. For example, lest we too easily praise Sunjata, the "Sorcerer," for his surpassing greatness, it should be noted that male and female sorcerers who are "practitioners of the most dangerous sorcery are distinguished by physical anomalies that they either acquire or are born with." They will specifically avoid

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"cleaning themselves, lest they weaken their powers" (Conrad 196). Throughout Fa-Digi Sisòkò's 1968 storytelling performance, Sunjata is in close association with those who also have such "physical anomalies." These figures—deformed women, old women and animals, a black cat (Johnson/Sisòkò 35, 42–44)—frequent the story from beginning to end. Indeed, in the beginning of the narrative, which includes a genealogy and listing of the thirty-three "noble clans," the last clan consisted of "pariahs." At this very point in Sisòkò's performance, the *Naamu-sayer*'s call-and-response cadence goes from his steady baseline rhythm to a jazzy riff—"Indeed" becomes "That's true, Eh, Fa-Digi, true" (27)—that calls attention to itself, and for second sight and hearing, with good reason. These "pariahs," "Deformed people, or those with epilepsy, are considered by many to be possessed of special occult power (nyama). Presumably such a person would be of benefit because of his/her power" (Johnson 113). These "deformed" vessels of power foreshadow the leitmotif, and epic irony, of the narrative.

Gender Deformity and Epic

The foregoing discussion of deformity prepares us for the most masked source of power, the humpbacked Sugulun Kòndè,[18] Sunjata's mother. Sugulun is ostracized by "six young maidens" who "all moved away and stood apart" from her because of her appearance, which an old dog described to the brothers: "Warts and pustules cover her. / They call her Sugulun-of-the-Warts!" (Johnson/Sisòkò 44–45). Hence, the humpback transforms a relationship that may seem merely rhetorical, if not gratuitous, into a substantive feature that sutures together epic and trickster and our three epics. Thus, as David C. Conrad argues, "Sogolon's ugliness and physical deformities are both blessing and curse. They signal the secret presence of occult powers qualifying her to become mother of Sunjata. The physical faults also cause her to languish unwed long after her age-mates have gone to their husbands" (198, 201–2). Sugulun's deformities, particularly the humped back that marks her as a human Ginda (buffalo), are iconic traits whose liminality signifies a unity between tricksters and epic heroes/heroines nominally recognized, but not pursued, by African epic scholars.[19] This aporia obtains perhaps because the trickster-hero has a critical salience and function among African Americans and other diasporic Africans because of slavery, or because the archetypes are so dissimilar: for example, animals/humans, ideal superhumans/grotesque animals,

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regents/bush dwellers. "One fundamental difference must be stressed between trickster tales and the general run of heroic lore," Okpewho notes, getting to the quick of the divide: "Trickster tales are mock-heroic in character and are seen as a perversion of true heroic values and ideals" (*Myth*, 280n67). Likewise, Ralph Austen recognizes Sunjata as a "gluttonous thief" but says the epic hero is "another, very opposed, type" ("Criminals," 366, 388).

Much of the heroic epic, Belcher notes, is founded on the "uniform notion of personhood" that foregrounds "individual development." The masculine premise runs counter to the "social construction of the individual in Africa" and to the realization that gender relations, including those in African epics, is not one of female support of males, but an "essential" role in which the male/female "pair forms an indivisible unit" (49). Derivative of this dynamic is the African precept that women are not merely supporters, or agents, but also principals: epic heroines, and empire builders, in their own right who exercise imperial mother-wit. Thus, women—especially the shape-shifting Du Kamisa and Sugulun Kòndè, and Sugulun Kulunkan,[20] Sunjata's mother and sister, respectively—are essential elements to the "establishment of the Mali empire" and imperial mother-wit (Conrad 190, 197–98, 209–15).

The economy linking creation myth, animal spirits, and gender that Keith Cartwright distinguishes from the Islamic narrative "patrimony and patronymics" (*Reading*, 26, 62–63, 70) is central, too, in other West/Central African epic traditions. Okpewho reads significant parallels between an Ijo creation myth and the *Ozidi Saga* (*Myth*, 137–51), which suggests that the trickster aesthetic informs this Ijo epic in multiple ways relevant to female potency, the need to situate trickster figures within the cultural performance, and the multifaceted character of epic protagonists. Given the power the Ijo associate with femininity, which is also the source of maternal sensibility, Okpewho notes, one Ijo narrator, his artistry showcased in an Ijo folktale, is hard-pressed to reconcile the two oppositions. He achieves this, Okpewho observes, by conflating a cosmogenic mythology of creation and the trickster tale: "We may therefore see this tale as an attempt by our narrator to match the usable ingredients of the [Tortoise] trickster tradition with his society's anxiety to affirm the feminine virtues against the oppressive claims of a feministic or matrilineal culture. The result—a plea for social sanity through subdued self-awareness." In other words, against the excesses of female creative power and in the recognition of maternal virtue, the Tortoise trickster's aesthetic and social function as a marginalized, disempowered "misfit" are deployed by the

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narrator to merge the powerful with the weak and thus achieve moral balance. Clearly, beyond his focus on the narrator's "selective use of the trickster tradition" and artistic "deliberateness," and in the face of a "divergence of purposes" that begs for far more attention than he gives (Okpewho *Myth*, 152), Okpewho's analysis lends itself to a critical extrapolation. His gendered close reading points toward a brilliant isomorphism here, one refusing the male/female, divine/vulgar, and epic/trickster binaries and creating more artistic possibility because of ontological and generic ambiguities.

The humpback defines Sugulun of Du,[21] the Buffalo, but if her humped back and short stature are disaggregated from the buffalo, the epic trickster unity takes quick form. For example, the tortoise trickster is common in West Africa, where he functions as a "misfit in organized society because he is ever at pains to upset, by the sheer force of his over-active wit, the contracts and constraints that society establishes in the interests of stability" (Okpewho, *Myth* 151). This "misfit" is known as Ewiri among the western and central Ijo, and Ikaki among eastern Ijos. Ikaki is a divine culture hero and liminal figure, an amphibian—primarily *oru*, or "village hero," but also considered *biniyou*, *bini orumo*, or *owu*, "water people" or "the water spirits." At the same time, to the Ijo *owu* also means "mask, masquerader, and masquerade dance.... Interestingly, however, the masks neither conform to the stereotype of the beautiful, light-skinned mermaid nor capitalize on import symbolism, suggesting that they may represent an older conception, as well as distinct category, of water spirits" (Anderson, "From River" 148; Drewal 195).

Thus, Ikaki, like other *oru*, according to Lisa Aronson, is associated with "superhuman" power, although it is also a typical, "short [and] stocky" African trickster engaged in "antisocial" and often "paradoxical behavior." This "superman" figure, the divine equivalent to epic protagonists, is eminently defined and empowered by its deformity. One of the tortoise species most familiar to the Eastern Ijo, the *Kinixys belliana* (a.k.a. Bell's Hinge-back), is known to be "exceedingly slow, awkward, and voiceless," has skin with a "dry, wrinkled, and scaly appearance," and a "slow lumbering gait" that marks it as a "very old creature." Among all Ikaki's traits, making it a liminal, "powerful spirit and a trickster par excellence," is its shell. The tortoise's *genigeni* ("variegated" or "multicolored") exterior design parallels the mythical potency it incarnates, according to Aronson: "The shell is clearly a source of the tortoise's dangerous powers. The ... shell is a kind of container of secretive and potentially harmful things, if not a source of Ikaki's power, trickery, and deceit.... It is worth noting that the Kalabari, and other Eastern Ijo

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groups, regard hunchbacks with a similar degree of fear and trepidation because of the mysterious mound on their backs and the perception that they exhibit an evil, sour temper" (Aronson 252–55; Drewal 195). Ikaki's carapace recalls the Banyangan *nyamasangwa*, for its "variegated" and "multicolored," "secretive," and "mysterious" qualities suggest the very essence of sorcery, and epic potential: "many-things," that unknowable unknown.

Add to this Ikaki's short stature, along with the Ijo belief that "short people are strong-minded" (Anderson, "Bulletproof" 110), and humpbacked deformity emerges as the essential unity between animal tricksters and epic protagonists giving resonance to numerous other deformities. Sunjata's name, following the Maninka's "practice of linking the offspring's name with the mother" (Conrad 190), is a matronym that anticipates his deformity and epical potency. Thus, Sunjata, as crippled child, is defined by his bent back, awkward gait, and shortness. Even *nyamakalaw*, *jeliw* (bards) most of all, represent this convergence: they are criticized (by nobles) as "bad," talkative, parasitic, trickster-like individuals (Bird, Kendall, and Tera 31; Conrad and Frank 2; Hoffman 37); nevertheless, and owing to their skills, they are sought by the same critics and are still capable of earning the *ngara-soma* ("heroic bard-sorcerer") designation (Hoffman 38). Mwindo, the very essence of *enfant terrible*, is the shortest of them all, and arguably the rudest, too. Although rare to the collected transcripts of Mwindic performances, Turtle, a trickster figure in the Nyanga cosmology, travels with Mwindo as a "blood" friend who "separates the water with a whip" to let them pass a lake, and carries the "magical bag" with which Mwindo "revivifies his people" killed in a confrontation with "Kabaraka, Lightning's brother" (Biebuyck, *Hero* 33, 280). Ozidi the Younger is short symbolically, as an adolescent, and literally in comparison to many of his antagonists, such as T*e*b*e*s*o*n*o*ma of the Seven Crowns, whose entrance is a cacophonous, polyphonic eyesore of gigantic proportions. When "T*e*b*e*s*o*n*o*ma burst in there singing his song," a rapping to be sure, on his head is an allegorycal theater and veritable house party: "ululating daemons," some of them dancing, two pairs of heads dialoguing, some others cooking and drinking, with "noise ... like a market." T*e*b*e*s*o*n*o*ma had seven heads, his head itself, the storyteller Okabou Ojobolo apparently suggests through gestures, "spread as wide as this house." His appendages are normal in number, but T*e*b*e*s*o*n*o*ma "was so tall that he almost disappeared in the air, like a tree he stood. And a cockerel stood at the crown of his head calling 'Kokoroko!'" (Clark/Ojobolo 236–37).

In the Ozidi performance context, epic idealism shows many faces over a

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progressive spectrum that ultimately folds back onto itself, necessitating some ritualized form of closure Ojobolo artfully manages. His revenge-quest immediately succeeding the primer in epic potentiality he receives from Oreame, his sorceress-mentor, the youthful Ozidi is still very much a deformed social pariah whose success is not a teleological given. This enfant terrible Ozidi wears an allegorycal cloak as a species of trickster, hence trickster's appearance in the narrative on his behalf. At the end of Night One (of a seven-night performance), just after Ozidi the Younger has dispatched the wives of two warlords, the "man-who-owned-the-town, that's / Ewiri Mr. Tortoise himself, known also / as Abame*l*akpa, because in all the town / he was the fabulist," explains to the Olotu (warlords) that "a man wronged will often bear a strong / son, didn't I tell you so?" (Clark/Ojobolo 57). This is an important cameo, for the Ijo's "cunning idler" (Clark/Ojobolo 59n61) is here aligned with the purpose and function—the weak, wronged, deformed challenging the Authority—of the epic hero. The allegorycal image Ojobolo and the Ozidi troupe performs is not only fabulous but also a form of epical realism. Hence, Ijo sculptors portray bush spirits as warriors with no physical deformities, except multiple heads, to signify, according to Martha G. Anderson, "clairvoyance, vigilance, and superhuman powers rather than anomalies." But the simple gaze is bellied by the critical ambivalence the war-like Ijo have toward these figures, who are occasionally represented, Anderson indicates, "as uncouth misfits, so independent and diffident that they transgress Ijo ideals" ("Bulletproof" 106–0).

Surely enough, the alignment of Ozidi's epic transgressiveness with Ewiri's augurs a terrible excess. Ozidi's desire to continually go out to "play" invariably takes him and his attendants into the forest and one conflict after another. In a tremendous reversal, Night Seven invokes the numerology associated with epic heroes, but now Ozidi's and Oreame's bloodlust, the antithesis of ideal morality, makes them figurative giants who are deformed by power, not by unjust social depravity. Ozidi the Younger's Fate having been reversed, and his epic trickster chrysalis shed, his and Oreame's actions have made epic performance a cultural norm, engendering copycat challengers who literally appear out of the forest. The epic antagonists, who are bad but also good insofar as they challenge Ozidi the executioner and wasteland-maker, join them in creating an agonistic civic atmosphere of terror that threatens total apocalypse.

Hence, just as epic performance is allegorycal, the magic-bearing and magic-wielding epic trickster figure—like Gates's signifying monkey, a trickster-proper cousin of Ozidi, Sunjata, and Mwindo—disrupts the ideal, symbolic understanding

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because s/he is always already *doubly* transgressive. Sunjata, according to Cartwright, who traces the Sunjatic tradition into American culture, is the very emblem of "transgressive heroic actions" because he commands his father's *barakha*, "Islamic grace or power" and, *nyama*, "occult energy" associated with Indigenous Malian "imperial motherwit." Although Cartwright addresses Sunjata's power, the *barakha* augmenting the "almost radioactive *nyama*" to render him an epic hero, this *nyama* associated with the potency of the humpbacked Buffalo of Du, the "humpbacked virgin" that is his mother, and his own rise from "lameness" ("Reading" 32–36), he might as well have been speaking of an epic trickster whose double-transgressiveness suggests that the threat of an "almost radioactive" excess is a morphological sine qua non of the performance. Not surprisingly, the plot proper starts in the kingdom of Du, where its gold-and-silver fetishizing prince exiles and slashes the breasts of Kamisa, the paternal aunt who raised him. This sociopolitically, geospatially, and physically deformed Kamisa transforms herself into the raging Ginda (buffalo) who lays waste to the best warriors and the kingdom. No warrior bearing metal-arms can defeat her, but two hunters who show son-like kindness and follow her instructions—to boil "many eggs," some of which they should toss down; they "become a great wilderness," "great lake," and "great forest" (Johnson/Sisòkò 35–37)—stop her rampage. The fertility topos here is clear: the wealth-obsessed prince's transgressions made Du a symbolically barren wasteland and the Ginda's "almost radioactive *nyama*" made it excessive, thus the need for an extended fertility ritual. Sisòkò's language is far from being merely flowery imagery and metaphor, for the lameness Sunjata overcomes to begin his "empowerment," Cartwright notes, is linked by *djeli* (Malian bards) to a "Mande trope of power, the tree" ("Reading" 34) out of ecological necessity: *nyama* is a veritable nuclear reaction of Creation/Destruction whose excessive, radioactive potential can scorch the sky and leave everything beneath a charred wasteland.

Hot and Cool/Dry and Wet: The Negro Speaks of Rivers, Hustles, and Flows…

The epic protagonist's command of forces of Creation and Destruction, just like the epic storyteller's construction and deconstruction of the narrative according to artistic temperament and social context, are metaphorically represented by the forging of hot metal and the flowing of cool water. The West/Central African epic hero and the epic bards are wielder/bearers of a multifaceted allegorical spirit in

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which simple archetypes regarding epic bodies and actions are paired with the potential for transgression and excess. In short, the macroscale heating or cooling of epic spirit also plays a role in the microscale performance moment through a soulful thermometrics: readings of the spirit as evidenced by the metaphorical role of water and forging in the performances.

The Sunjatic performance, like other traditional epic performances, is saturated with the hot/cold, forging/water metaphor. The septennial Sunjatic ceremony in Kangaba reaches its peak intensity in the fluid, hot state when the roof is removed from the ceremonial kamabalon (village hut) and society is forged anew. Parallel to this are Sunjatic storytelling performances, Charles Bird notes, where power flows into the jeliw, the "*faasa* singers fire us up for the battle," while the "maana ["epic narration"] tellers calm the body and soothe the soul after it is over" (278, 281) (brackets mine). The Banyanga epic, featuring an epic protagonist who is precursor to and antithesis of the chief, shows the hot/cool dynamic occurring on the macroscale as a circumcision ritual that converts boys into men. The association of the initiates with the wet circumciser and the dry *Shébatende*, the initiates' ritual father ("Nyanga" 90),[22] is central to Banyanga culture. In effect, this association conjoins symbolic circumcision and maturation—cool/hot, wet/dry—as one way of reading the Mwindic tradition. It is understandable then that Rureke saturates the précis of his narrative with hustle and flow even before the musicians, tuning and scaling, can get into the rhythmic groove. Under the cool guise of nuptial bliss of Nyanga marital customs and the seemingly beneficent betrothal of Iyangura—Shemwindo's sister and Mwindo's paternal aunt whose name etymologically relates to justice—to *Mukįtį* (a serpentine water spirit), Rureke provides a watery, love-you-back story that is, plain and simple, an old-fashioned hustle. King Shemwindo is the big man of Tubondo who moves his sister's just presence out so that he can be the top dog. The underdogs in the early moments of this epic drama are twofold: justice (Iyangura), sent "down the river" as far as Shemwindo is concerned; and Mwindo who, thanks to Shemwindo's decree against his birth, becomes the ultimate underdog. It is this decree that sets him singing, literally, the equivalent of sorrow songs lyricized by Langston Hughes: "I've known rivers..." (1291).

Although he is the underdog, symbol for the quintessence of hustle and flow, hot and cold, earth and water, it is relevant to note that Banyanga wisdom makes Theodor Adorno's well-reasoned *caveat*—"In the end, glorification of splendid underdogs is nothing other than the glorification of the splendid system that makes

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them so" (28)—a no-brainer embodied in traditional common sense. Mwindo's "heart is high" and full of "reckless ambition" that marks him as an unseasoned hothead; the chief's "heart is low" and he is respected by people because he has "purified himself from excess and proven his wisdom." The widespread presence of rivers, brooks, and pools in Nyangaland are significant: even before Mwindo begins his odyssey "upstream" and "downstream" by river away from Tubondo to the river's source, Rureke tells the backstory about the marriage negotiations and ceremony of his paternal aunt to a water spirit in serpent form—he is the "master of the pools"—that the Nyanga associated with "mystery." As one might expect, the pools, some with "deep, somber waters" or "gigantic whirlpools," exist as "places of mystery and awe near which enthronement rites for chiefs are sometimes held." Interwoven with and inseparable from the water metaphor, of course, is forging past and present, for Rureke pivots from Iyangura's marriage into description of Shemwindo and Tubondo, Mwindo's "famous" father and home. It is both his father and home which Mwindo—once he finds Iyangura and his maternal uncles "forge" him iron shoes, pants, shirt, and pants—proceeds to attack, along with the "people" who had turned on him (Biebuyck, *Hero* 4, 37; Biebuyck and Mateene/Rureke 43–53, 82, 88–92n11). What follows are exile, recovery of Iyangura, and a series of epical tasks—warfare against his father's army, a trip to the underworld filled with fantastic feats against the gods, and then the capture of his fleeing father—culminating in Mwindo's coronation as chief. The story should but does not end here, for Mwindo continues to exhibit the same epical behavior. This behavior is not just transgressive, but excessive, for the Nyanga social code devalues the ideals that make Mwindo epical: boasting, individualism, wanderlust, competitive aggression, and talkativeness. Thus, when Mwindo kills Kirímu, a dragon of the forest, and makes sport of his feat by inviting all of his people to see the spectacle and "wagging" his magical scepter (Biebuyck and Mateene/Rureke 133), he has overstepped his boundaries.

But who or what can stop Mwindo, the quintessential survivor who mastered the trickster's wit en route to becoming the ultimate warrior? The answer is a higher authority, the very emblem of an ecologically sound rain forest: Nkuba, the god of lightning and friend of Kirímu, snatches Mwindo off his throne and on a yearlong solo journey. Mwindo's frightful experiences in the realms of Rain, Moon, Sun, and Star—he freezes, he wanders as a nomad, he is thrashed sevenfold times for his insolent heroism, toughness, and pride—make clear the cosmological and ecological threat his unwise policy-bravado entails (Biebuyck and Mateene/

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Rureke 135–43). After all, the rain forest is the Banyangas' "world." Thus, even though they have villages and fear the forest, they also "love it," too (Biebuyck, "Nyanga" 90; Biebuyck, *Hero* 26–27, 62, 98–99). Mwindo's sword, forged battle armor, and other magical accoutrements constitute the short-term possibility of a divine utopia understood, by virtue of his celestial journey, to be a mere prelude to the increasing possibility of apocalyptic collapse. Freshly deposited on his throne, the wizened, humbled Mwindo enacts laws to prevent such infractions in the future. End of story.

Conclusion

The critical analysis above allows us to answer the paradoxical questions lying at the heart of antebellum American slave lore (can trickster-slaves defeat epic trickster masters?) and the simultaneity of Mwindic epicality and Banyangan pacifism vis-à-vis other societies with heroic epic performance traditions. Addressing the latter issue first is perhaps most helpful because of the African origins of the slaves, the widespread recognition that antebellum-American slavery constituted—at the very least—a social epic, and the *Mwindo Epic* tradition offers a critical, extant insight into the convergence of epic aesthetics and real-world effects.

How is the violent paradox of Mwindic epicality and Nyangan pacifism possible? The Nyanga's culture and the synergistic relationship of their bodies to their environment provide a foundation broad enough to nullify the contradiction. Mwindo is the hero in the garden, capable of realizing the apogee of heroic epic possibility and violence, his cause both a righteous and necessary one, for Shemwindo is the paradigm of a dictatorial chief in a cosmology in which he is formally recognized as the central functionary (chief) and a crucial earthly link in the *scala naturae*. His corrupt rule portends inexorable progress toward the destruction of Banyangan cosmology, but the Banyanga literally enjoy deep mirth, laughter, in direct proportion to Mwindo's justifiably epical exploits and abilities, which subdue and dominate Shemwindo and, indeed, some divinities important to their teeming rain forest. The Nyanga, their bodies having far greater allegorycal extension, into one another, the forest, and into the spiritual world, can apprehend the apocalyptic violence of epic heroics without being reduced to it. Shemwindo may be the original cause of the battle royal, and Mwindo's heroics may double as high comedy, but the Banyangan second sight is worth noting: their eyes were

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watching chief Mwindo, for his excesses exceed his father's when he, raising Cain and some, kills the allegorycal emblem of the rain forest's regenerative mystery and life. Mwindo may have given chase to Shemwindo into the underworld, eclipsing Odysseus's bravado en route, but he is well on his way to dimming the entire rain forest and converting it into a dark and dusty underworld over which he—the formerly epic trickster, hero, and chief—would truly be the dark Lord. He, too, like Adam and Eve, is expelled from the Garden, but even though Mwindo kills and himself replaces the Serpent of the rain forest, redemption is possible since the Nyanga's common sense of the body is extensive enough to permit such. Mwindo's infraction is nothing a little exposure to Rain, Moon, Sun, and Star—the year here symbolically reacquainting him with the natural cycles of the seasons, and cosmic balance—cannot cure.

Thus, epic heroism is part of the Banyangan culture and body politic, but this performance conforms to a blueprint—situating human bodies in balance with the biosphere—that makes for healthy, sustainable relationships and the possibility of heroic epic performance that recognizes the need for such. Epic hero and trickster-hero archetypes, in other words, should not, in and of themselves, be understood as absolutely good or bad, but sociopolitically charged storytelling performances that exist in a broader, balanced ecological context. More importantly, while these two archetypes are distinct from each other, they should not be considered discrete forms that are mutually exclusive. Such archetypal simplifications reduce the allegorycal complexity of the figures—real and imagined, literal and metaphorical—subject to all human storytelling. Indeed, this archetypal simplification, stripped of its essential ecological context, augurs the greatest danger: without this ecological common sense the epic trickster, who epitomizes mastery of the trickster's survival wit merged into the epic hero's can-do bravado, is a sure candidate to become a master of all he surveys. In light of Levine's recognition that "the strong and not merely the weak could function as trickster" and contradictory adherence to a flattened racial allegory, it is wise aesthetics and policy for scholars and activists to, simultaneously, reconsider the potency of (slave) tricksters against a master class and explore the place of the epic trickster performance in the archetypal divide.

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NOTES

1. Of course, the primary sources and the scholarship on this subject are massive. In my own research, several folklorists and literary scholars proved to be most useful. They are, in alphabetical order: Roger D. Abrahams's *Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia* (Chicago: Aldine, 1970), and "Some Varieties of Heroes in America," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 3 (1966), 341–62; Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989); Lawrence W. Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford UP, 1977); and, John W. Roberts's "The African American Trickster as Hero," in *Redefining American Literary History*, ed. A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff and Jerry W. Ward Jr. (New York: MLA, 1990), 97–114, and *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1989).
2. As mentioned later, Ephraim Peabody, a Unitarian minister and abolitionist, likened slavery to a "whole Iliad of woes" and the flight from it narrated by Frederick Douglass and other slaves to be a "modern odyssey" (62).
3. Originally published as *Soundjata, our l'Epopée Mandique*. G. D. Pickett published the English translation.
4. Some of the reasons relate to: the folklore/literature divide, which has become far more pronounced since the 1950s and 1960s, and which follows inter- and intraracial class stratification; the deep and abiding belief that posits a fundamental European hero/African trickster divide; a Eurocentric and feminist reading of epic in Homeric terms such that all traditional epic performances are considered good (ideal) or bad (hetero-patriarchal, imperialistic) regardless of cultural differences; and, probably academic territorialization, which undermines collaboration between Africanists and African Americanists. For scholarly approaches to African American literature that rely on traditional African epics, see Roberts, Krumholz, Cartwright ("Reading

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Roots," *Reading Africa*), Rummell, and Rutledge ("Epic Trickster," "All Green").

5. Emeritus Professor Olson taught the first black studies literature course at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln in the late 1960 or the early 1970s.
6. Levine is, of course, not alone.
7. Although I coined this term, I relied on previous scholars who examined the intersection of epic heroes and tricksters: Joseph Mbele's "The Hero in the African Epic," diss., U of Wisconsin–Madison, 1986, 192–204, and Susan Slyomovics's "The Arabic Epic Poet as Outcast, Trickster, and Con Man," in *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World: The Poetics of Community*, ed. Margaret H. Beissinger, Jane Tylus, and Susanne Lindgren Wofford (Berkeley: U of California P, 1999), 54–68. Although he did not apply his argument, Mbele theorized that in regard to the trickster's "liminality," "transgression," and "excesses," the awareness that "these could be an integral part of the hero is only gradually being realized" (197). For application of the epic trickster paradigm to literature, see Rutledge "All Green."
8. Trickster-gods are a rarity even in West Africa; the Yoruba is just one of many enslaved West African ethnic groups with trickster traditions, and tricksters may be more appropriate for quotidian power negotiations, not the "whole Iliad of woes" and "modern Odyssey" (Peabody 62) slavery represented.
9. See G. W. F. Hegel's *Aesthetics*, 1094–108, and his comparative remarks regarding Western and Eastern epic traditions. Homeric and oral epic scholar Gregory Nagy identifies Bakhtin's adherence to Aristotle's limited, Homer-based definition of epic as a critical flaw. See "Epic as Genre," 21, 28. Even as late as 2000, scholar Dean A. Miller, in *The Epic Hero*, "begins with a history of the hero, an overview of the type revealed for the most part in epic or related genres, *from his special and authentic Greek beginnings, when Homer sings his magnificent song*" (xi) (italics mine). Of course, by "norm" I do not mean an absolute. John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is a case in point, among other works attuned to Europe's folk traditions.
10. Schultz's "sunless state" echoes ecocritical discourses connecting human creativity and global environmental threats. See, e.g., Wai Chee Dimock's provocative introduction to *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007).
11. Also spelled Son-Jara, Sundiata, Soundjata, among other forms that reflect orality and diversity within West Africa and among earlier Arabic and Western European translators. I use "Sunjata" unless quoting a text that uses another version.
12. For the Ashanti of Ghana, Nyame is the "God of all things."
13. See Bird, Kendall, and Tera, 31, and Conrad and Frank, 12–13, who attribute confusion with *nyamakalaya* both to the Europeans and the nobles.
14. Although a classical uplift strategy, Okpewho foregrounds African bards' oral performance creativity as a form of ambiguity that stands in opposition to "more

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recent editions of the Sunjata story [that] observe the linear order," such as Niane's *Sundiata* (Okpewho, *African* 298).

15. Notable exceptions are works like Mark Buchan's *The Limits of Heroism: Homer and the Ethics of Reading*. Buchan's interest in rereading, for example, "The *Odyssey* from the Perspective of Its Victims" (chapter 7), by "taking away the kinds of comfort that certain sorts of teleological readings provide," allows him to offer "an alternative and more complex picture of the ethics of these works" (11–17).
16. Austen believes this dynamic is "in many respects universal," though he locates the critical difference between African and non-African/modern heroes in the former's limited creativity owing to their "zero-sum" worldview ("Criminals" 390).
17. Similarly, Okpewho's attention to the Sunjatic performance leads him to recognize the cautionary aesthetic: "heroic excellence may be better off with a concern for human life: the highest heroism is a well-tempered heroism" (*Myth*, 101–2). But the dangers of the idealized epic myth go no further, since Okpewho defaults back to aesthetics not informed by sociopolitical concerns; see, in this regard, his *Once Upon a Kingdom: Myth, Hegemony, and Identity* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1998).
18. Her name is also spelled or referenced in different ways: e.g., Sogolon, Sugulung, Sogolon Wunde. I use Sugulun Kòndè, from *The Epic of Son-Jara*, unless a quote uses another form.
19. See, e.g., Austen, "Social" 136, and "Criminals" 366, 388; Belcher, *Epic Traditions* 50; Biebuyck, *Hero and Chief* 28, 64, 111; Mbele 182–204; Okpewho, *Myth* 280, note 67.
20. Called or spelled "Do Kamissa," "Sogolon Wunde," and Sogolon Kolonkan," respectively, by Conrad.
21. Also spelled "Do" in some sources.
22. The Banyanga masks of the circumciser and *Shébatende* show this dichotomy: "the antelope hide mask of the circumcisor evokes wetness and so does the circumcisor himself," while the "dry barkcloth hood of *Shébatende* is said to be an absorber of blood after the [circumcision] operation" (Biebuyck, "Nyanga" 90).

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